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SUBJECT: SAKHAROV PRIZE "BITTERSWEET" FOR ORLOV, MEMORIAL

REF: MOSCOW 2491

Classified By: Pol Min Counselor Susan Elliott for reason 1.4 (d)

¶1. (SBU) On October 22, the European Parliament awarded its annual Sakharov Prize to the rights group Memorial, specifically activists Oleg Orlov, Lyudmila Alekseyeva, and Sergey Kovalev. This is the first time since the fall of the Soviet Union that the prize, which includes a cash award of 50,000 Euros, has gone to Russians. European Parliament President Jerzy Buzek said that the assembly hoped "to contribute to ending the circle of fear and violence surrounding human rights defenders in the Russian Federation." Orlov told reporters that he was "flattered," but that he believed that the prize belonged to Russian human rights leaders in general.

¶2. (SBU) Orlov also told reporters that receiving the prize was "bittersweet," as he was aware that the European Parliament was awarding the prize at least partly in the memory of murdered Memorial activist Natalya Estemirova, who herself had been nominated in 2005. "She should have gotten this prize," said Orlov, "but instead, she got a bullet, and we get the prize." He also noted that although the prize was appropriate, this was hardly cause for celebration, as its very appropriateness was an indication that rights in Russia are not receiving their proper defense, something Orlov said was "our fault" as well as the government's.

¶3. (C) Despite the pride that Alekseyeva said that she felt from "this important award," it was business as usual for these activists the following day, October 23, which they spent at a conference (fittingly held at the Sakharov Museum) organized by defenders of imprisoned magnate Mikhail Khodorkovskiy. Speaking to PolOff on the margins of the conference, Memorial board member Svetlana Gannushkina said that she hoped that the award would provide some protective cover for Memorial workers, as any authorities inclined to harm them would think twice, given the international attention now focused on the group. (Note: The monetary award also could not come at a better time, given Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov's recent court award of demanding monetary damages for "slander" from Memorial (reftel). End note.) Orlov, however, was pessimistic, saying, "We thought in the past that such awards would provide us with some security, but they have not added one iota to it." Asked whether she thought that the award might draw negative governmental attention upon the group, Memorial spokesperson Yulia Klimova told PolOff that the group already had so much negative attention from the GOR that "this couldn't make it any worse." Kadyrov's only statement to the press was relatively mild, simply expressing his view that there were other, more worthy human rights groups than Memorial who deserved such an award.

Comment

¶4. (C) On balance, the award is a positive development for

Memorial. Its timing is highly symbolic; Gannushkina noted that it came exactly 100 days after Estemirova's murder, and other news outlets pointed out that the award -- which in the past has gone to Nelson Mandela and to Chinese activists -- also coincided with the 20-year anniversary of the award's creation. That it also comes almost exactly 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall only adds to its resonance, and Buzek could not resist a reference to his own history as a member of Solidarity in Poland in the 1990s. Alekseyeva and Kovalev both also have long histories as Soviet dissidents. Kovalev raises problems as an awardee because of recent controversial and political statements, such as his call for an independent Chechnya and his accusation of FSB involvement in the 1999 apartment bombings. His inclusion will likely provide grist to nationalists who delight in accusing Westerners of plotting Russia's destruction in cahoots with their fifth column in the human rights community. However, Kovalev's history as the founder in 1969 of the first ever Soviet human rights association, and later as one of Memorial's founders, presumably made him impossible to leave out. Nationalists will continue to make noise, but cooler heads within the GOR will be forced to face the reality that Memorial has just scored significantly on the international scene, and hence to reckon with them.

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